

Better

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Summary: The story of Camicazi, from first grade to twelfth grade. From when her daddy broke her arm to when she raced across the stage in her robes. Modern AU, One-shot. Rated T for domestic violence, romance, blah blah blah. (Cover by AvannaK)

Better

**\*\*First Grade\*\***

The ice cream from the cafeteria tasted better than Camicazi ever could have imagined. Six years of waiting, and she'd finally earned it. It was deliciously cold, and creamy, and it swirled upward in a curvy mountain of white. If she pressed her tongue against it for a moment, it would melt in her mouth. Camicazi decided the pain in her arm and its bulky white cast were worth it. She wished it could happen more often.

She looked over and beamed a creamy white grin at Mama. Mama had raccoon eyes. She hated that. Camicazi almost yelled it out to her, but another thing Mama hated was interrupting, and if Camicazi yelled she'd be interrupting. Also, she liked the nice doctor. He didn't have much hair. She had told him that earlier, and he had let her rub his head for good luck with her good arm. It felt weird but funny. She had smiled, and the doctor smiled too.

Now he wasn't smiling. He was talking to Mama, with a serious face. Camicazi didn't like the word "serious" much. Too boring, she thought.

He was asking Mama a question, but the question didn't make any sense. What were "pressing charges"? Was that like laundry? But what were charges? Like in battles?

Mama was sighing. She was looking at her fingers, and one of her fingers was shining. No, Camicazi realized, that was the ring. Mama

slid the ring off her finger. Did she not want it anymore? Camicazi wanted it. It was pretty.

Mama nodded. Camicazi went back to her ice cream. Talking about laundry and "pressing charges" was boring. Ice cream was better.

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### ><p><strong>Second Grade<strong>

Camicazi liked destroying things. Usually Mama and her big sisters hated her destroying things. They'd say, "Oh, no, Camicazi, that was Grandma's vase!" or "Oh, no, Camicazi, it's all over the floor!" or "Oh, no, Camicazi, don't step in that!"

Today, though, everybody was acting weird. They were destroying things with her. Camicazi laughed as Mama chucked Daddy's workbench out the garage door. Lizzie grabbed the power tools, and they all banged onto the driveway. Emma had the screws. Then she didn't, and it was like the sky was raining screws, and nuts, and bolts. Mama was laughing, and crying, and she had raccoon eyes again.

Rip, rip, rip, went all Daddy's posters. Crack went Daddy's bat. Crash went Daddy's bottles. Bonk, bonk, bonk-bonk-bonk went Daddy's ugly birdhouse. Their yard was a mess. It was glorious.

Camicazi stood in the driveway, in her Minnie Mouse pajamas, laughing. She watched Mama grab a hammer. The ring was pulled from her pocket and dropped on the ground. Bang, bang, bang, bang. Now the ring was weird looking.

All this destruction - Camicazi decided this was a good way to start second grade.

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### ><p><strong>Third Grade<strong>

"Eeww," said Camicazi. Mama hopped off the kitchen counter. The other lady, with the dangly earrings, jumped back. They both stared at Camicazi. They looked a bit guilty, a bit annoyed.

Camicazi pointed a skinny finger at them. "You were kissing," she announced, her lunch box clanging to the floor. "I saw you. Eeww!" Kissing was so gross. Her sisters liked it, but Camicazi couldn't see why. Yuck, yuck, yuck.

Mama frowned and crossed her arms. "Camicazi, manners," she demanded. Camicazi struggled to think. Which ones? There were so many different types of manners now. When she was little, it was only please and thank you and keeping your knees together when you were wearing a skirt. Now it was so complicated. She had to say things like "may I please" and "no thank you" and "yes ma'am".

She gave it a shot. "Hello, nice to meet you, may you please stop kissing, thank you." That sounded about right.

The dangly-earrings lady laughed. Mama did her thing where she smiled very tiny and very quickly but then sucked in her lips and frowned. "Go to your room. You have homework, don't you?"

Camicazi frowned. How did she always know?

"Yeah," she said, yanking at her backpack straps. She took several steps, and then decided she was mad. Her feet banged against the carpet, then the stairs. Thomp, thomp, thomp they went.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Fourth Grade<strong>

Camicazi liked Ms. Benedict's handwriting. It wasn't curly or swirly, but straight and normal, like the letters on the computers. Her problem was what the words were saying. In the "Subject" box, there was, "The Roman Empire." Camicazi didn't like the Romans, but the "Names" box was even worse. Her name was there, but so were Freddie Ingerson and Hayden Haddock. Otherwise known as Fishlegs and Hiccup. And they were boys. Nasty, terrible, rude, disgusting boys.

They were at her table, exchanging glances, looking over at her every once in a while before retreating to their side and muttering to each other. Ugh, Camicazi hated the sight of them. Fishlegs had yucky yellow hair that stuck straight up, and nasty thick glasses. Hiccup's red hair flopped out in every direction - that and his freckles made him look completely ridiculous.

They had been sitting here for a good two minutes. Camicazi hadn't turned her glare off the entire time. The boys hadn't been able to look at her for more than a second. Finally, Hiccup groaned, scooted around in his chair, and looked Camicazi straight in the eyes. Steely blue met smart green.

"Look, I know you hate boys, and I know you don't want to work with us at all, but we have to finish this project. If we don't, I don't know about you, but our parents will probably lock us up in some moldy dungeon in the middle of nowhere." Hiccup smiled tiredly and said, "So, just this once. We'll work together, just this once."

Camicazi weighed her options. Her mother's hatred of boys or her mother's hatred of bad grades - which one would get Camicazi in the most trouble if she violated it? She decided.

"All right. Just this once."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Fifth Grade<strong>

Camicazi smoothed her pink skirt, tracing the flower pattern with her fingers. She hated the skirt, but Mom had insisted. She had wanted Camicazi to look nice for the pictures. Camicazi twisted in her chair for perhaps the hundredth time that afternoon. Hiccup was focused on the staged looming in the front of the gym with an almost fevered look. Fishlegs kept pulling back the sleeves of his fancy shirt to wipe his gleaming forehead. Camicazi grinned.

"You think we're gonna get good grades?" she pestered them again.

"I told you, the report cards said we were fine," Hiccup repeated

tiredly.

"You think middle school will be okay?" she asked.

Fishlegs whimpered. "Don't remind me," he whisper-wailed. "Bullies and lockers and toilets and classes and hallways and bullies and nasty teachers and bad lunch food and no recess and bullies! How does anyone ever get out of that place in one piece?"

"My sisters will protect me," Camicazi said cheerily. Mr. Parks laid a pudgy finger on his lips and frowned at Camicazi, but she ignored him. "Not that I need protecting," Camicazi bragged. "We Boglands are known for being tougher than cement."

"Right," muttered Hiccup. Camicazi's stomach flopped. She glanced at the stage. The third graders were receiving their awards. Her stomach flopped again.

"Hey," she heard Hiccup whisper. She twisted around again. She and Fishlegs stared at Hiccup, who sighed before offering them reassuring smiles. "We'll be great," he said.

Camicazi believed him. Hiccup was never wrong.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Sixth Grade<strong>

Hiccup's finger, smudged with grease, poked at their flimsy sketch. "The sides are next," he told Camicazi. The two huddled on the platform they had been working on all morning. It seemed precariously balanced, but Camicazi's dedication, Hiccup's brains, and Fishlegs's paranoia had made sure only a sizable tsunami would tip it over.

Camicazi, honestly, had stretched the truth about her woodshop abilities. She wasn't that good in shop at school, and her dad hadn't exactly shown her the ropes of carpentry in his garage workshop. But Hiccup hadn't seemed to notice and Fishlegs was too busy trying to find excuses to get down from their tree house-in-progress. He didn't like heights. It was ironic that the project was in his backyard, but Mr. Ingerson was the only parent who would permit it.

Camicazi's fingers wrapped around her red Soho cup, and she tipped it into her mouth. Wonderfully cool lemonade slid down her throat, and she smiled. "This is a brilliant idea," she crowed, dropping the empty cup onto the platform. "For a boy, of course," she added, grinning at Hiccup.

He laughed and shrugged. "What can I say? When I'm good, I'm good," he said contentedly. Gazing out across the neighborhood, he grinned at the glowing green leaves fluttering above their heads. "It's perfect up here," Hiccup said. His red hair fluttered in the wind. It still made him look ridiculous, but now Hiccup usually flattened it below a dark brown baseball cap. It was good for warm spring afternoons like this one.

Camicazi scooted to the edge of the platform. In the distance, past the houses, past the town, past the forest, she could see purple peaks looming in the distance. She swung her legs over the side of

the wooden beams and grinned back at Hiccup. "This place is good," she said.

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### ><p><strong>Seventh Grade<strong>

Fishlegs had his eyes squeezed tightly shut. Soup was smeared across his face as he tried unsuccessfully to shove a large spoon into his mouth. Camicazi rolled her eyes at him and glanced over at the popular girls' table. She could see Hiccup. He had sneaked his hat back on and was staring at his hands as he loomed over Astrid - Astrid Hofferson. It seemed to Camicazi that there hadn't been a moment, in grade school or otherwise, when Hiccup wasn't daydreaming about the amazing, brilliant, beautiful Astrid Hofferson. Camicazi had finally convinced Hiccup to pull out all the stops. She'd already spent the Winter Jamboree last year sitting between don't-make-me-dance-or-we'll-all-die Fishlegs and Astrid-is-too-perfect-to-not-look-at Hiccup.

"Come on," Camicazi whispered, not bothering to glance away now. She needed to watch every detail. She could see Hiccup's hands waving around, like they always did when he was talking. Astrid was looking up at him, impassive as ever. "Come on, come on," she begged the heavens.

"What's going on? No, don't tell me." Fishlegs gave up on the soup, dropping his spoon onto the table and cowering in his seat. "I don't want to know."

Seconds - seconds as long as hours, it seemed - passed. Then loud, high-pitched laughter boomed through the room. It was the nastiest breed of laughter to ever spawn in middle school - the condescending, cruel laughter of the popular girls. Every bit of Hiccup seemed to break and shatter onto the floor. His shoulders crumpled, and he staggered away, toward the bathrooms.

Camicazi saw red for a good thirty seconds. That's what she would tell the principal later. Truthfully, Camicazi did see red. But she also saw through the red. Fishlegs's soup in her hands. The ground blurring as she ran. Astrid's mockingly gleeful face peering up at her. And - best of all - bright red soup covering Astrid's perfectly braided, formerly blond hair.

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### ><p><strong>Eighth Grade<strong>

"You're kidding." Hiccup and Fishlegs stared at their friend. Fishlegs's face bulged with uncrunched popcorn. Hiccup was still holding a drink in mid-air as he repeated, "You're kidding. No way."

Camicazi swallowed. She hadn't believed it either, at first. But the flyers had flooded the mail, and it was all her older sisters could possibly talk about, and her mother's eyes were made of steel. "Next year," Camicazi said quietly. She crossed her legs and stared at her jeans. She briefly wondered what she would have to wear. Plaid skirt, white blouse, boring sweater - that's what she'd seen on the flyers, anyway. She'd miss her jeans. She'd miss sleeping in her own bed.

She'd really miss her friends.

Fishlegs gulped. "You could run away," he suggested tentatively. "Stay in the tree house. I'd bring you food."

Camicazi gazed out the window. The fight with her mom had worn her out. All she felt now was shock. "Can't," she mumbled. She looked back down. Hiccup was staring at the floor now, rubbing at a smear of dirt with a skinny finger.

"She has to go, Fishlegs," Hiccup said. He looked back and forth between Fishlegs and Camicazi. There was no argument. Nobody argued with Hiccup anymore. And Camicazi already knew the battle was lost. There was no arguing with her mother.

She swallowed. She tried to be brave. "It'll be alright," she said, dragging her voice up with all the determination she could muster. "I'll come back every break. We can hide out in here. Like we always do."

Hiccup nodded, hesitantly. Fishlegs sighed. "Nothing will be the same without you," he groaned, shoulders sagging. "You make the best popcorn."

She shrugged. "I'll teach you before you leave."

Both boys jerked like they'd been shot. "No!" they yelled in unison. Camicazi blinked. She was confused but happy too.

Fishlegs, taking a deep breath, said, "We'll live without popcorn."

Hiccup gave her a brave grin. "But not forever."

Camicazi could breathe again.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Ninth Grade<strong>

Camicazi was dreaming of the tree house. She could see it in her mind, though the picture had faded a bit. The wood was sanded, but not much, and it overlapped in the corners. A scrap of Mrs. Ingerson's old kitchen curtains fluttered over the one window. A picnic blanket stapled to the wood served as a door. There were food stains from when goofy fun had knocked over a drink. Popcorn kernels lay dusty in darker corners. A bird's nest perched in the rafters. In winter, they dragged their comforters into the hideout and crowded in one corner. In summer, Hiccup dragged in an electricity-free fan they had invented themselves.

She didn't want to open her eyes. She knew if she did, she wouldn't see the familiar tree house roof and Hiccup's Sharpie doodles. She'd see blue sky, with seagulls hovering overhead. She couldn't feel the splintered wood beneath her fingers - instead, soft towel sprinkled with rough sand. She wasn't home, Camicazi reminded herself. She wasn't in the tree house. She was at the beach.

Never before had Camicazi ever hated the beach so much.

She forced her eyes open and immediately squinted at the harsh sun blazing in the sky. When Camicazi craned her neck, she could see Mom and her girlfriend, Ava. Lizzie and Brenda were probably sipping beer together at the bar. Emma and Carly were snuggling in a hammock somewhere. Camicazi shot a glare at her mom.

Conniving - that was her mother. First a girls' school - then Thanksgiving spent at school - then Christmas break in Iceland - and now summer in Aruba. Camicazi couldn't enjoy any of it. She wanted her best friends.

Even if they were boys.

A tear leaked from her eye.

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><p><strong>Tenth Grade<strong>

Camicazi heard the sound of Mary Janes clacking loudly on marble flooring. She spun around and came face to face with Patti. Patti giggled and rubbed noses with Camicazi. Camicazi forced a smile. She couldn't rub back, though. She couldn't.

"How's my beautiful girlfriend?" Patti laughed, her permanently clammy hands wrapped around Camicazi.

Camicazi looked at Patti and considered honestly. "Not very well," perhaps, or "I'm missing my friends," or maybe "I don't like this school," or even "I'm not even a lesbian and I have no idea why I said yes to going out with you." Instead, she heard herself saying that she was fine.

Camicazi Bogland, if nothing else, was always fine.

Patti giggled again and bounced on her toes. Her long brunette ponytail swung back and forth, and Camicazi's eyes followed its path. She tried to remember the last time she'd felt happy. It felt like forever. Was it Christmas? No, she'd come home expecting to spend every waking minute in the tree house, only to be monitored like a hawk. Somehow, her mother had suspected that all those parties and outings with Camicazi's "absolute BFFs Lily and Katie and Mandy and Annie" were not what they seemed. The only solace Camicazi had, as always, was her iPhone â€|

\*\*CAMICAZI. 6:34 PM. \*\*I'm bored.

\*\*HICCUP. 6:34 PM.\*\* Same.

\*\*CAMICAZI. 6:35 PM.\*\* My mom is making me work.

\*\*HICCUP. 6:35 PM.\*\* Doing what?

\*\*CAMICAZI. 6:40 PM.\*\* Making dinner.

\*\*HICCUP. 6:40 PM.\*\* Oh no, you're all doomed.

\*\*CAMICAZI. 6:43 PM.\*\* Hilarious.

\*\*HICCUP. 6:43 PM.\*\* I know.

"Finally, somebody's smiling!" Camicazi was jerked back to school by Patti's face, as usual, less than an inch away. Camicazi felt the smile fade away. For a moment she wanted to slap Patti. Camicazi wanted to break up. This surprised her. Her relationship with Patti made her popular and comfortable, both at school and at home. It was easy.

But she couldn't do it anymore.

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><p><strong>Eleventh Grade<strong>

Three years was too long. Camicazi yanked at the rope ladder and wondered if it would hold her weight. It seemed so much more flimsy and thin than it used to be. She sucked in a breath and craned her neck to stare up at her forever hideout. It was smaller than she remembered â€" closer to the ground too. So much had changed. Wrapping her fingers around the ladder, she jumped up and landed on the first rung. The ladder swung, and the tree house creaked ominously. Camicazi gulped. She scurried up the ladder, her eyes focused on grabbing the rungs.

"Hi, Camicazi."

She knew who it was even before she looked up. Looming above her, grinning, was Hiccup. He had the same red hair, the same freckles. They didn't seem so ridiculous now. Had she really ever thought that?

With a laugh tumbling out of her, Camicazi threw herself into the tree house. It hadn't changed after all. There were still popcorn kernels in the corners, and stains on the floor, and a bird's nest in the rafters. Fishlegs was asleep in the corner, his mouth wide open in a long, silent snore. He'd only gotten taller.

She threw her arms around Hiccup. "Long time, weirdo," she shouted in his ear. She liked doing that when she was a kid â€" running up and screaming a greeting in his ear. He'd always flinch and cringe and complain.

But more had changed than she had thought. Hiccup flung his arms around her too and yelled right back, "Whatever!" It seemed hilarious to her. She squeezed him tighter. He squeezed right back. Camicazi felt like laughing and crying at the same time. She felt like pushing Hiccup away and scooting closer. Then, out of nowhere, she had her head on his shoulder. How did that happen? Why wasn't he getting all awkward and stiff, like he always did whenever girls got near him? Why did he smell good? More importantly, why didn't she want to move?

Camicazi felt Hiccup's lips atop her head. His hands rested on her back. She sighed. Finally, finally happy.

"Long time, weirdo," Hiccup mumbled to her.

Camicazi smiled into his shoulder. "Whatever," she replied.

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><p><strong>Twelfth Grade<strong>

"Cameron Bogland!"

Camicazi thought she would be sweating more. She just felt cold, and clammy, despite the heavy, dark purple robes. Blowing the tassel out her vision, she rushed across the stage. Headmistress Zimmerman smiled proudly and handed over the diploma. It was wrapped in a purple ribbon " of course. When Camicazi's fingers wrapped around it, she was surprised at how heavy it felt. It felt like the entire world was in there. Perhaps that was just her imagination.

Seconds " seconds as long as hours, it seemed " wafted by. The world was turning slowly as Camicazi shook the headmistress's hand. She glanced out at the audience. There they all were " Mom and Ava, Lizzie and Brenda, Emma and Gwen " whooping and cheering her on. They'd picked a section with not a single man in sight, of course. That was Mom's policy. Therefore, that was Lizzie's and Emma's policy. That had been Camicazi's policy too, she realized, for a long time. And the thought of boys brought to mind a certain one. A ginger one.

Who was now standing six feet away from her, the spotlights gleaming on his wrinkled robes.

"Hiccup," Camicazi breathed. He was here. Today was his graduation ceremony, two hundred miles away. He must have left the moment he had his diploma. In less than a moment, she had seen the diploma in one hand. There was a clump of dandelions in the other.

She laughed when she caught his eye. He looked so " adorable, especially when he was embarrassed. His freckles almost disappeared when his cheeks were flushed like that. Typical of Hiccup " he'd probably intended on bringing her a rose, but of course the only flower shop he could find was probably out of them.

Camicazi yanked at her robe and slid the diploma into the front pocket of her jeans. She'd worry about that later. She briefly heard the shouts of surprise and shock and outrage coming from the other students, from the headmistress, from her family. Blah, blah, blah. She took three steps forward, her lips connecting with Hiccup's.

Talking about graduation and family pressures was boring. Hiccup was better.

End  
file.